



NEWS RELEASE

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NOAA, FWS Establish Critical Habitat for Loggerhead Sea Turtles in Northwest Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) and the Department of Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) today announced two final rules to designate critical habitat for the threatened loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*) in the Atlantic Ocean and on coastal beach habitat along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

The NOAA-designated marine critical habitat includes some nearshore reproductive areas directly off of nesting beaches from North Carolina through Mississippi, winter habitat in North Carolina, breeding habitat in Florida, constricted migratory corridors in North Carolina and Florida, and *Sargassum* habitat, which is home to the majority of juvenile turtles, in the western Gulf of Mexico and in U.S. waters within the Gulf Stream in the Atlantic Ocean.

The USFWS-designated terrestrial critical habitat areas include 88 nesting beaches in coastal counties located in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama and Mississippi. These beaches account for 48 percent of an estimated 1,531 miles of coastal beach shoreline used by loggerheads, and about 84 percent of the documented numbers of nests, within these six states.

"Protecting endangered and threatened species, including loggerhead sea turtles, is at the core of NOAA's mission," said Eileen Sobeck, assistant NOAA administrator for fisheries. "Given the vital role loggerhead sea turtles play in maintaining the health of our oceans, rebuilding their populations is key as we work to ensure healthy and resilient oceans for generations to come."

"The fate of more than just the loggerhead sea turtle rests on the health of Atlantic coastal environments," said USFWS Director Dan Ashe. "Coastal communities from North Carolina to Mississippi are also intrinsically tied to these shorelines and waters. By conserving the turtle and protecting its habitat, we are helping preserve not only this emblematic species, but also the way of life for millions of Americans."

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires that NOAA Fisheries and USFWS, the two federal agencies responsible for administering the act, designate critical habitat when a species is listed, or within one year if critical habitat is not determinable at that time. Although loggerhead sea turtles were originally listed in 1978 worldwide, the listing was revised in 2011, when nine distinct population segments (DPS) were listed, including the Northwest Atlantic Ocean DPS and the North Pacific Ocean DPS, the only two that occur in areas under U.S. jurisdiction.

Under the ESA, critical habitat identifies geographic areas containing features essential to the conservation of a listed species. Critical habitat designations do not create preserves or refuges

or affect land ownership, and only result in restrictions on human activities in situations where federal actions, funding or permitting are involved. In those cases, the federal agency concerned works with NOAA Fisheries or USFWS to avoid, reduce or mitigate potential impacts to the species' habitat. Critical habitat is only designated within U.S. jurisdiction.

The loggerhead is the most common sea turtle in southeastern United States, nesting along the Atlantic Coast of Florida, South Carolina, Georgia and North Carolina and along the Gulf Coast. It is a long-lived, slow-growing species, vulnerable to various threats including alterations to beaches, vessel strikes and bycatch in fishing nets.

The proposed rules, which were published in the *Federal Register* on March 25, 2013 (USFWS) and July 18, 2013 (NOAA Fisheries), were both made available for extended public comment. NOAA Fisheries and USFWS each held three public hearings during the comment periods on their proposed rules (NOAA Fisheries in Morehead City, Wilmington and Manteo, N.C.; USFWS in Charleston, SC, and Wilmington and Morehead City, N.C.).

To view the final NOAA Fisheries rule for marine critical habitat, visit:
http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/criticalhabitat_loggerhead.htm

To view the final USFWS rule for terrestrial critical habitat and the associated final economic analysis and maps, visit:
www.fws.gov/northflorida/SeaTurtles/2014_Loggerhead_CH/Terrestrial_critical_habitat_loggerhead.html.

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